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TAGS: PGOV PREL SY

SUBJECT: KHADDAM INTERVIEW CONTINUES TO PROVOKE ANGRY
REACTION IN SYRIA

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche, per 1.4 b,d.

¶1. (SBU) The December 30 interview that former Syrian VP Abdul Halim Khaddam granted to the al-Arabiyya TV network has provoked a torrent of denunciation and anger in Damascus. The People's Assembly held a special session the following day -- televised live on Syrian TV -- to allow a parade of parliamentarians to criticize Khaddam's disloyalty and to call for his trial in absentia on charges of treason. MP's also accused him and his family of corruption. (Note: Syrian media used voice-over commentary to effectively censor a call by moderate Islamist MP Mohammed Habash for the government to release imprisoned Damascus Spring detainees, including MP's Riyad Seif and Ma'moun Homsi. Habash accused Khaddam of having been instrumental in the decision to have them imprisoned.)

¶2. (SBU) Media accounts report that the National Command of the Ba'ath Party voted January 1 to expel Khaddam from its ranks. There were also reports that an angry mob tried to burn down Khaddam's hometown residence in the coastal city of Banyas and that security forces raided the offices of his son, Jihad Khaddam, in the Damascus suburb of Mezzeh. (Note: All three of Khaddam's sons are now in Paris, the last one having departed Syria three days before the interview, according to media contacts.)

¶3. (SBU) A statement in the official Syrian Press Agency (SANA) January 2 called Khaddam "a joiner to the chorus of those hostile to Syria," noting that his remarks made him a part of the "U.S.-Israeli scheme that aims at striking Syria's steadfastness." The statement also accused Khaddam -- contradicting his own assertions to the contrary -- of having been an Old Guard obstructionist, consistently opposing reform and modernization in Syria when he was in power.

¶4. (SBU) The privately run Syrian news websites Champress and Syrianews, both generally pro-SARG, posted scores of anonymous commentaries, most of them fulminating against Khaddam's hypocrisy, corruption, and feeble attempts to portray himself as a political and economic reformer thwarted by others, including Bashar al-Assad. A few accounts stated that Khaddam had said the right things for the wrong reasons.

¶5. (C) Comment: Khaddam's controversial interview certainly caught the regime's attention and became the talk of the town over the long holiday weekend. Many debated his motives for making what are viewed here as extremely provocative comments, wondering if he is trying to re-position himself for some kind of unlikely political comeback. While much of

the interview is in fact balled up in long historical asides typical of Ba'athist politicians, Khaddam grated on regime raw nerves in saying that Bashar al-Asad had addressed Lebanese PM Hariri in a highly threatening manner months earlier than previously thought. He also likely angered the SARG with his crafty hints of Syrian involvement in the killing, even as he repeatedly insisted that he did not want to make accusations while the investigation was ongoing. His pointed remarks on inner circle, Asad family corruption also pressed very hard on an extremely sensitive nerve. Finally, his efforts to portray Asad as an overly emotional and incompetent decision-maker (for his "wrong assessments of U.S. policy" and his mistakes in Lebanon) and as the real obstructionist to reforms (that Khaddam says he tried repeatedly to champion) must have infuriated and embarrassed the regime. It is unclear if his interview is somehow connected to UNIIIC's reported request to question Khaddam, FM Shara'a, and, according to a Reuters account, Asad himself.

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